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Oman: Domestic Forces and the Succession

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An Intelligence Assessment

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This paper was prepared by Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with contributions by Office of Central Reference, and NESA. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. (U)

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Oman: Domestic Forces and the Succession (b)(3)

Key Judgments

Information available as of 22 February 1985 was used in this report.

If Oman's Sultan Qaboos is removed from power—either by death, incapacitation, or coup—we judge that a member of his family, the Al Said, will become the next Sultan, especially if the succession takes place within the next five years. Real power, however, will rest with a handful of Omani officials and British advisers, many of whom already control significant aspects of decisionmaking. Over the longer term, Qaboos's removal probably will accelerate the decline in British influence in favor of nationalist-minded Omanis in the government and the military.

Prospects for the stability of a successor regime appear good, although potential trouble spots bear watching. The US Embassy reports no organized opposition or significant popular discontent, but US officials do not have access to all levels of Omani society or government. We believe that the process of working out power-sharing arrangements among competing senior officials will prove more difficult over the long run than the selection of a successor to Qaboos. Omani nationalists will focus on reducing corruption, eliminating the vestiges of British influence, and spreading the benefits of Oman's oil wealth in order to control the centrifugal forces in Omani society. The nationalists are conscious of the need to forge links with the tribes in the interior and to satisfy new social groups being created by the modernization process. Their efforts to institute reforms, however, are certain to impinge on the preserves of traditional elites and could eventually bring them into conflict with the new Sultan.

The coming to power of a nationalist-dominated government probably will affect the tone of Oman's relations with the United States. Nationalist-minded leaders like Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yousef bin Alawi and President of the Palace Office Ali Majid al-Maamari—who are likely to dominate the foreign policy of the new regime—both favor close strategic cooperation with the United States. They will press, however, for more financial aid and explicit security commitments to help offset what they regard as the high political costs of developing close military ties to the United States. They will also be more critical of US policies in the Middle East. The nationalists are eager to reduce Oman's traditional isolation in the Arab world and to gain broader financial and political support from their oil-rich Arab neighbors. They are also sensitive to growing support for Arab causes among Oman's small but expanding educated urban elite.

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The rise to power of nationalist leaders like Alawi and Maamari will ultimately benefit US interests in the region, even if they prove cantankerous on military cooperation in the short term. By pursuing policies more attuned to internal and regional concerns, they will make Oman more stable internally, more accepted internationally, and, thereby, a more reliable long-term friend and security ally of the United States and the West. The greatest danger to US interests in Oman would come in the unlikely event that the nationalists failed to govern effectively because of conflict among senior officials. Such conflict could provide opportunities for currently quiescent elements—leftist, tribal, or fundamentalist—to coalesce against the government and its ties to the West and bring about a more radical change of regime.

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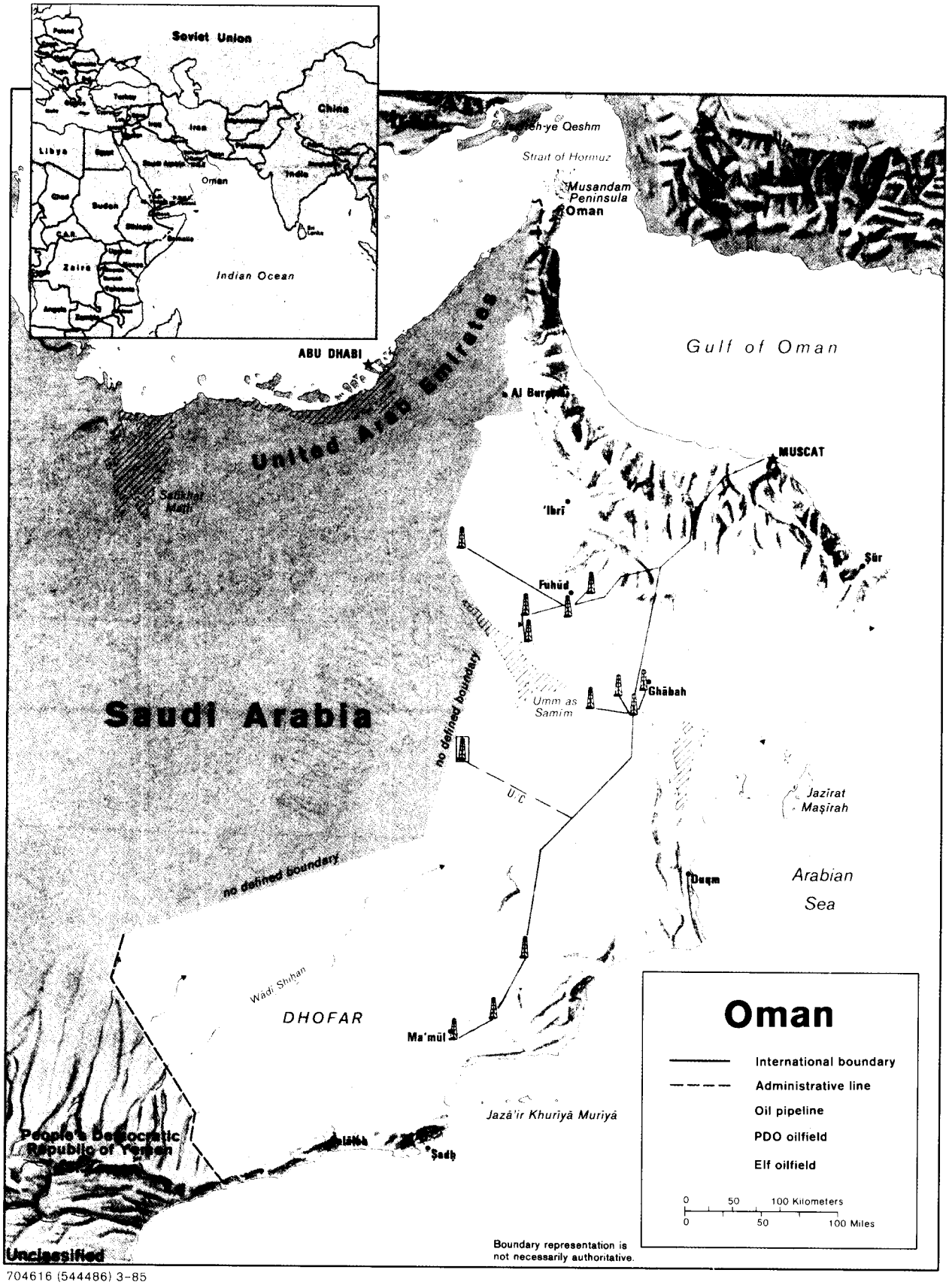

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Sultan Qaboos, 44, is in relatively good health. Barring accident, assassination, or, more unlikely, a coup, we expect him to rule Oman for the next several decades. Still, there are potential problems that could complicate the succession, whenever it occurs, and affect Oman's stability and relations with the United States. Qaboos has no natural heir, and we believe he will make no provision for the succession. New political advisers are also coming to power who share a different perspective on how the country should be governed than did Qaboos's advisers in the early days of his rule. Social and economic conditions in the country are changing as well and could presage serious problems for stability if Qaboos were to die suddenly or be removed from office.

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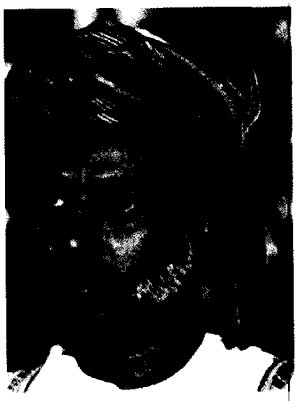

Sultan Qaboos bin Said (b)(3)

The Setting

Aided by British advisers, Sultan Qaboos bin Said seized power in Oman in July 1970 by deposing his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, in a nearly bloodless coup. Qaboos's father, a reclusive and ultraconservative monarch, had kept Oman isolated from the outside world and undeveloped despite the discovery of oil in the early 1960s. When Qaboos assumed control, Oman had no political institutions, a medieval economy, and only minimal contact with its Arab neighbors.

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Qaboos has done much to bring Oman into the 20th century, albeit at a pace that does not threaten his absolute control. He has used Oman's oil wealth to build one of the most effective military forces in the Gulf region and raise the standard of living of most Omanis. With help from Iran, the United Kingdom, and Jordan, he ended a 10-year rebellion against Al Said rule in the southern province of Dhofar. He moved Oman closer to its Arab neighbors by joining the Gulf Cooperation Council and urging support of moderate Arab causes. He has taken stands unpopular with his new friends, including his staunch support for the deposed Shah of Iran and for Egyptian President Sadat following his signing of the Camp David accords and his refusal to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization, but most Omanis approve his actions.

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Since 1975 and the end of the Dhofar rebellion, there have been no signs of overt opposition to the Sultan. Qaboos rules much as his father did—autocratically, without the mechanisms for consultation and consensus that are customary in other Gulf monarchies—but most Omanis have not complained. His occasional forays to "meet the people" and his appointment of a State Consultative Council have been welcome diversions, even though the trips are staged events and the Council has no powers to recommend legislation. Omanis apparently have not blamed their ruler for the slow pace of Omanization (replacing foreign advisers and workers with natives) or for the reduced investment opportunities caused by the soft oil market and lower oil revenues.

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We believe, however, that there is unhappiness with the Sultan's increasingly reclusive style of rule, his Westernized lifestyle, his preference for all things British, and his reluctance to designate a successor or create a succession mechanism. Sources of varying reliability have been critical of the "Persianized" way

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Political Instability and the Economy

Over the past decade, Muscat's development expenditures have improved the living standards of most Omanis and increased Qaboos's popularity. Impressive gains have been made in health, education, housing, and development of infrastructure. In 1970 Oman had three public schools, 19 health care facilities, and 10 kilometers of paved roads. Since then, Qaboos's government has built more than 500 schools, 100 medical facilities, and 3,200 kilometers of paved roads. In addition, it has built more than 2,700 low-cost housing units, installed 21,000 telephone lines, and increased electricity production from 8 million kWh to 1.4 billion kWh. Port facilities were improved, enabling growth in external trade, and two international airports were built.

Despite the enormous growth of the last decade, however, the Omani economy faces major problems that Qaboos or his successors will have to tackle. Almost two-thirds of the labor force still works in subsistence agriculture. Life expectancy and literacy rates are low, and infant mortality and the death rate are among the highest in the world. Oman is dependent on oil revenues for virtually all of its export earnings and about 85 percent of government revenues.

Qaboos recognizes the need to diversify Oman's economy, both geographically and by sector. Living conditions are generally worse in the villages than in the cities. The result is rural population flight that has added to urban unemployment and crowding.

Although the US Embassy reports no evidence of increased dissatisfaction in the cities, Muscat has earmarked funds for the development of infrastructure and social services in towns and villages in remote regions of Oman in hope of stemming migration to the cities. The government has developed long-term strategies for sectoral diversification in light industry, minerals, agriculture, fisheries, and services. Muscat will make some progress toward meeting these goals, but we believe that implementation will be limited by Oman's budget problems and the small size of the Omani market. Muscat had to borrow $400 million in 1985 to meet its current budget, and the Embassy projects recurring deficits if the Sultan commits Oman to new and expensive military purchases. Diversification programs will also be thwarted by the lack of skilled native manpower. (b)(3)

If the price of oil were to plummet, export earnings would decline sharply, and Qaboos would be hard pressed to fund military purchases and satisfy demands for infrastructure development and social welfare programs. Over the longer term, Qaboos or his successor will face similar problems in satisfying the rising expectations of the population as Oman's oil is depleted. Proved reserves probably will last only another 25 years. Declining government revenue would increase competition among political and economic interest groups for scarce resources and fan discontent in the military and the general populace that could contribute to political instability. (b)(3) (b)(3) (b)(3)

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Qaboos rules—referring to his long periods of seclusion away from the capital, his personal lifestyle and preferences, and haughtiness. Other generally reliable sources say Omanis speak wistfully of the good old days under Sultan Said, but the sources claim this nostalgia has more to do with the unsettling pace of modernization than dissatisfaction with Said's son.[1]

[1] Omanis generally accept and are content with the Sultan's mode of rule, lifestyle, and pro-British bias. Reports from reliable sources claim many Omanis are proud of Qaboos's regal bearing and disdain for the populist affectations of other Gulf and Western leaders

Oman's Power Elites

Historically, succession in Oman has been determined by civil war, fratricide, or British influence, and only rarely has a successor been designated by the previous ruler. If Qaboos dies of natural causes and there is neither the threat of war nor a designated heir, we believe the Sultan's closest advisers will use the form of a family council to select a successor to Qaboos. (b)(3) (b)(3) (b)(3) (b)(3)

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Qaboos's family, the Al Said, will not play a major role in this process, in our judgment. Over the years Qaboos has carefully restricted their participation in government to ceremonial, nonsubstantive posts, and they have a history of fratricide and obstreperousness. (b)(3)

We believe the transition will be smooth, with decisionmaking after Qaboos controlled for the most part by the Sultan's nationalist advisers—even though a family member will reign. The post-Qaboos power coalition will also include members of Oman's influential merchant families—several of whom played key roles in the early days of Qaboos's rule—and, at least in the near term, British military advisers, who will continue to represent both Oman's and Whitehall's interests. (b)(3)

The Nationalists: Oman First

In our judgment, the nationalists are becoming the most important powerbrokers in Oman and will dominate the government after Qaboos's departure. They represent a new generation of leaders and have been gaining in influence since early 1982. Labeled "Omani Firsters" by some Western observers, they are led by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yousef bin Alawi and Maj. Gen. Ali Majid al-Maamari, the President of the Palace Office. During the two years Alawi has been de facto Foreign Minister, he has slowly gained overall control—second only to Qaboos—of Oman's national security affairs and foreign policy. He is the principal Omani contact with US officials. Maamari, a career military officer, holds an equally powerful position. His Palace Office supervises and coordinates the executive functions of the Omani Government, has a major role in determining access to the Sultan, and oversees Oman's intelligence services. (b)(3)

Alawi and Maamari are close friends and together are creating—and promoting to leadership positions—a loose alliance of like-minded colleagues in the military, government, and intelligence and police services. Other prominent nationalists include Minister of Commerce and Industry Salim al-Ghazali, Undersecretary of the Palace Office Col. Malik Sulayman al-Maamari, Khamis bin Hamad al-Battashi (also in the Palace Office), and the head of the Royal Oman Police, Rashid al-Kilbani. Their power, according to US officials, derives not only from their official position but also from their influence with Sultan Qaboos. (b)(3)

These nationalists share common experiences and, unlike other political groupings in Oman, a vision of what Oman should become. Most are native-born Omanis, either from the northern areas near 'Ibri or the southern Dhofar Province, and most are Ibadhi Muslims. Some, like Alawi and Ghazali, were educated abroad in Nasir's Egypt, Ba'thist Iraq, or even China, participated in the Dhofar rebellion in the 1960s, but returned to Muscat following Qaboos's overthrow of his father. (b)(3)

Our analysis of other reporting on Omani politics indicates the nationalists have the following goals: (b)(1) (b)(3)

- To curtail and gradually eliminate the influence of the Sultan's original circle of advisers, known as the Muscat Mafia.
- To replace as many British expatriates in the government and military as possible with skilled Omanis without weakening the military establishment or seeming to threaten the Sultan.
- To reform the government, reduce corruption, develop the tribal areas, and perhaps encourage the Sultan to broaden the political process by permitting a consultative assembly.
- To move Oman publicly toward the Arab mainstream by urging support for moderate Arab causes. In private the nationalists will probably continue to hold parochial views of the world, but they will pay more public attention to issues of importance to their friends, such as the Palestinian problem and US relations.
- To improve the terms of military and economic agreements with the United States by making it pay more "rent" for its presence in Oman.

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- To balance the military relationship with the United States by integrating Oman more fully into Arab and regional groupings.

We believe the nationalists are loyal to Qaboos, but they also are intent on implementing their political program for Oman. They have no timetable and are not wedded to establishing either a constitutional monarchy or a republic. They are pragmatic and flexible, willing to adjust their goals so as not to alarm Qaboos or his British advisers. They are willing to work with these advisers, whom they view as necessary if Oman is to continue to modernize its economy and military and defend itself. They will, however, try to establish clearer roles for the British as advisers not policymakers, a distinction that currently is not clear, particularly in military decision making.

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The nationalists have been successful thus far in implementing many of their agenda items. Several of the more venal members of the Sultan's Muscat Mafia have been removed from office, and younger Omanis who share the nationalists' world view are being appointed in greater numbers to posts in the government and in the military. Foreign and domestic policies are being redirected or redefined, with an eye to Arab consensus and Omani self-interest (see appendix).

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The Muscat Mafia: Out of Sight But Not Out of Power

When Qaboos came to power, he relied on a small circle of British and Omani advisers. Western observers dubbed the Omanis, who came from a dozen of the most powerful merchant families, the "Muscat Mafia." They held posts in the Cabinet, the Sultan's household (the Palace Office), and on the special councils Qaboos established to advise him on oil, defense, finance, and development policies. All viewed their portfolios as personal fiefdoms and used them, as well as their close relationship with the Sultan, to enrich themselves. Omani law requires foreign firms to have an Omani commercial company as a local agent, and virtually all the lucrative dealerships for foreign companies came into the hands of these few merchant families. An academic study indicates that these families are centered in the capital area, where they dominate the nonoil sectors of the economy through quasi-monopolistic franchises. These enable the families to control the supply of goods and services to the government, the petroleum industry, and local contractors.

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The most prominent members of the Muscat Mafia include Qais Abdul-Munim al-Zawawi, once Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and now Deputy Prime Minister for Financial and Economic Affairs; Umar al-Zawawi, brother of Qais and a personal adviser to Qaboos; and Muhammad al-Zubayr, Special Adviser for Economic Planning Affairs who was Minister of Commerce and Industry until December 1983. Their removal from the Cabinet—allegedly for personal reasons and not for corruption—has probably restricted their ability to influence the awarding of government contracts, but they continue to act as the Sultan's representatives in international financial negotiations and as his personal envoys. Unlike the Omani nationalists, most members of the Muscat Mafia are not Ibadhi Muslims. According to reliable sources, they represent diverse backgrounds; some are Baluch, while others are Zanzibari or even Indian Hyderabadi, ethnic minority groups that have dominated Oman's trade and commerce for centuries. Reliable sources report most were childhood friends or financial sponsors of the Sultan before he came to power or played a role in the 1970 coup. All have profited handsomely from their connections with the Palace.

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The British in Oman: The Last of the Raj

The United Kingdom has taken a proprietary interest in Oman for more than two centuries. British advisers have determined the succession, balanced the budget, and defended Oman's rulers against threats of civil rebellion and foreign intervention. Once viewed as a drain on the British budget, Oman has become an important contributor to the British economy since oil was discovered in the 1960s.

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Muscat injects an estimated $1.5 billion in hard currency into the British economy annually. The money comes from the profits of British firms doing business in Oman, sales of military and security equipment, and remittances from the salaries of nearly 7,000 British nationals working in Oman. This

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Leading Omani Nationalists

Yousef bin Alawi bin Abdullah

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs since February 1982 . . . de facto Foreign Minister (Qaboos holds portfolio) and one of most influential Omanis in the government . . . enjoys confidence of Sultan . . . described by US officials as a careful and ambitious diplomat with a reputation for getting things done . . . also described as aloof, calculating, arrogant, but honest . . . allegedly disliked by many of his subordinates . . . supports 1980 Access Accord and favors institutionalized, periodic consultations with the United States . . . critical of US policies in Lebanon and toward Palestinians . . . born in Salalah, Dhofar . . . in 1960s represented the Dhofar Liberation Movement in Cairo . . . returned to Oman in 1970 . . . about 40 years old. [redacted] (b)(3)

Ali Majid al-Maamari

President of the Palace Office and First Aide-de-camp to the Sultan . . . has rank of Major General . . . responsible for overall direction of the government . . . power derives from his control of access to Qaboos, involvement in security issues as head of the National Security Committee, connections in military and among younger generation of Omani nationalists . . . described by US official as a man of strong character who is favorably disposed toward the United States . . . gradually asserting his control over Palace Office and internal security since taking over from Landon in 1981 . . . was a career military officer in Land Forces . . . has served Qaboos personally since 1976 . . . vigorously opposes corruption among government officials . . . about 37 years old. [redacted] (b)(3)

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Salim Abdullah al-Ghazali

Minister of Commerce and Industry since December 1983 . . . was influential member of the Sultan's inner circle in late 1970s as Undersecretary in the Defense Ministry and de facto Defense Minister . . . fell from grace in 1981 following appointment of General Creasey as Chief of Defense Staff because of unabashed public criticism of Creasey [redacted]

studied guerrilla warfare and Communist doctrine in China, attended Algerian Military Academy, and served in the Omani contingent of the Iraqi Army from 1966 to 1970 . . . China experience allegedly turned him into a staunch anti-Communist . . . US Embassy officials claimed he was then a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman . . . returned to Oman after coup in 1970 . . . served as Sultan's liaison officer with the armed forces 1973 to 1979 . . . described by Embassy officers as intelligent, loyal, dynamic, and ambitious . . . 37 years old. [redacted] (b)(3)

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The Muscat Mafia

Qais Abdul-Munim al-Zawawi

Deputy Prime Minister for Financial and Economic Affairs since February 1982 . . . longtime friend of the Sultan . . . acts as de facto Finance Minister . . . also Deputy Chairman of the Councils on Development and Financial Affairs (authorize projects and expenditures in the civilian sector of the government) . . . described by US officials as intelligent, urbane, and articulate but also has reputation for being corrupt . . . member of one of Oman's oldest and wealthiest business families . . . 49 years old. (b)(3)

Umar Abdul-Munim al-Zawawi

Personal adviser and longtime friend of the Sultan . . . brother of Qais and one of first Omani medical doctors . . . manages Qaboos's personal finances and arranges Oman's international loans, according to the US Embassy . . . frequently serves as the Sultan's personal envoy . . . member of Financial Affairs Council . . . allegedly the wealthiest man in Oman and, one of the most corrupt . . . 54 years old. (b)(1) (b)(3)

Muhammad al-Zubayr

Special Adviser to the Sultan for Economic Planning Affairs . . . had served as Minister of Commerce and Industry from 1974 to December 1983 . . . as Minister was responsible for initiation and supervision of all industrial projects and foreign firms wishing to do business in Oman . . . according to Embassy, had little interest in his Ministerial job, which "conflicted" with his extensive business interests . . . a Dhofari and childhood friend of Qaboos . . . 44 years old. (b)(3)

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includes approximately 1,800 active duty British military officers on contract or seconded to Omani forces for whose services Oman pays twice. Under the loan service agreement, Oman must cover the pay and benefits for the British officers in Oman and an equal amount for the individuals replacing those officers in the British forces.

The relationship between Qaboos and the British in Oman is symbiotic. British advisers in his father's palace helped engineer the coup that brought Qaboos to power. They helped him modernize the government bureaucracy and the military and defeat South Yemeni–backed insurgents in the Dhofar rebellion. Qaboos, is grateful to the United Kingdom for its past help and its present commitment to Omani security and for British advisers, whom he seems to prefer because of their loyalty and effectiveness.

[redacted]

[redacted] In addition, British military personnel hold important staff and command positions throughout the security services and the armed forces—especially in the Air Force and Navy.

Oman's Ruling Family: Looking for a Candidate

The Al Said family has ruled Oman for more than 200 years. Unlike the ruling families of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, where family councils are important in determining the succession, establishing consensus on policy issues, and ensuring family members a dominant role in government, the Al Said do not act as an effective political group and play only a marginal role in the government. Those few Al Said who hold senior positions in the government, including three Deputy Prime Minister posts, do not exercise real power, in our view.

The 2,000-member Al Said family is small by Gulf standards. Only 50 are direct descendants of the main branch of the family, and the Embassy believes that only 20 are considered eligible to succeed the Sultan. The remainder are ineligible because of their Zanzibari origins.[2] Many Western observers agree that native-born Omanis in general resent the better educated, more talented Zanzibaris who reside in Oman. This resentment appears to be shared by the Sultan and other senior officials and is reflected in their attitude toward the ruling family's Zanzibari branch.

[2] Omani traders and slavers first colonized East Africa in the 17th century. The Zanzibari side of the Al Said family is descended from the 19th century ruler Said bin Sultan al-Said, whose empire included most of the Indian Ocean littoral from the Strait of Hormuz to Zanzibar. A member of the Al Said family held power in Zanzibar until 1964. Many Omanis, including family members, returned to Oman from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, when Oman restricted immigration of Omanis from East Africa

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The royal family has been characterized by Western observers and diplomatic sources as lackluster and unambitious. As a group, they have a reputation for shyness and diffidence, evading responsibility, reclusiveness, and laziness—characteristics that are often attributed by the same sources to the Sultan. According to the Embassy, most hold minor government sinecures or are silent partners in companies run by others. Quite a few live on allowances from the Palace. (S NF)

The Al Said are probably closer to the Sultan's older Muscat advisers in background and outlook than they are to the nationalist faction. They are not enamored of Arabism and, according to the Embassy, often prefer non-Arab—and non-Omani—company. They are cosmopolitan in outlook, have been educated abroad (usually in India or Europe), and many have foreign wives. Many speak better English than Arabic. In their businesses and government jobs, they rely heavily on foreign advisers. Most if not all the Al Said recognize that the family owed its wealth to British subsidies and its continued rule to frequent British military intervention. (b)(3)

The family has no mechanism for selecting a successor to the Sultan and in the past often opposed the ruler. Intrafamily feuding—the Al Said have a long history of fratricide—has frequently determined who ruled Oman. As in other Middle Eastern societies, the preferred pattern of succession is to the next oldest male heir—father to son or brother to brother. Because Qaboos has no son or brother and is unlikely to name his successor, we believe a council of senior family members would choose one with the concurrence of senior Omani officials and an eye on British opinion. believes that seniority within the family would not be an important factor in the selection. (b)(1) (b)(3)

In our judgment, the likeliest successors to Qaboos from within the Al Said are his uncle, Shabib bin Taimur, who was appointed Minister of Environment in May 1984; Thuwainy bin Shihab, a cousin who was promoted in April 1984 to be Deputy Prime Minister (b)(3)

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for the Governance of the Capital and His Majesty's Personal Envoy; and Fahad bin Mahmoud, another cousin who is Deputy Prime Minister for Legal Affairs.

Shabib bin Taimur, the youngest uncle of the Sultan, is considered a succession candidate primarily because of his close family tie to the ruler, . He served in the Foreign Ministry and was Ambassador to Pakistan and Morocco before being appointed Minister of State and Special Envoy for the Sultan in 1981. In the Embassy's view, the 41-year-old Shabib is being groomed as a potential leader in the government, but other generally reliable sources describe him as a playboy and claim Qaboos dislikes and mistrusts him.

Thuwainy bin Shihab probably is the most senior royal family member in the government after the Sultan. He presides over ceremonial functions in place of the Sultan, receives foreign dignitaries, and serves as regent when Qaboos is abroad. Embassy officials describe Thuwainy—who may be in his late sixties—as a loyal lieutenant who shuns policy and decision-making responsibilities. We concur that this apparent lack of ambition is the reason for Thuwainy's enhanced status with Qaboos. however, he also is connected to merchants and technocrats in the capital, and they probably would support his candidacy for the succession. If he were to succeed Qaboos, he probably would not wield significant power, and his sons would not automatically become heirs to the throne.

A third possibility for the succession is *Fahad bin Mahmoud*, a second cousin of Qaboos's who has served as Deputy Prime Minister for Legal Affairs since 1979. the most capable of the current generation of the Al Said and claims he was active in drafting the anticorruption law and the decree establishing the State Consultative Council. This could make him an acceptable candidate for the Omani nationalists who supported these efforts. Information from reliable sources suggests that many Omani officials would prefer Fahad to Thuwainy or Shabib, who are seen as less experienced. Still, the Embassy judges that Fahad has not distinguished himself in any of the posts he has held.

Haitham bin Tariq receiving credentials from Sultan Qaboos

The Next Generation

Since Qaboos at 44 is relatively young, he may outlive those uncles and cousins who currently are potential successors and are his age or older. Among the younger members of the Al Said family, the most likely candidate to replace him, in our judgment, would be one of the five sons of Qaboos's late uncle Tariq. Tariq, who died in 1980, served as Prime Minister for a short time after the coup. One son, Haitham, serves in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Chief of European and American Affairs, and the Embassy has speculated he could replace Alawi someday. The other sons of Tariq are in business or the military. According to the Embassy, Tariq's adult sons have all shown considerable potential and some ambition. Little is known about other members of the younger generation.

Religion and Succession

Qaboos's legitimacy is based on inheritance and custom, as well as British support. It does not rely on religion, although the Sultan maintains the appearance of being a devout Ibadhi Muslim and has been carefully promoting Islamic concerns since he came to power. Under Qaboos, the government has supported a wide variety of religious activities, including mosque construction, publication of Ibadhi religious works,

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The Al Said

Shabib bin Taimur Al Said
Minister of Environment since May 1984 . . . youngest uncle of Sultan . . . born in India . . . graduate of Oxford University . . . married to Swiss woman . . . described by Embassy officials as foppish and superficial . . . stridently pro-West.

(b)(3)

Thuwainy bin Shihab Al Said
His Majesty's Personal Envoy and Deputy Prime Minister for the Governance of the Capital since April 1984 . . . second cousin of Sultan . . . probably highest ranking family member in government and leading member of Al Said family . . . educated in Iraq in late 1930s . . . served Qaboos's father as Deputy Governor of Muscat . . . appointed by Qaboos in 1970 as Governor and a special adviser . . . member of Financial Affairs Council and Chairman of the Oman Tender Board . . . described by Embassy as pleasant, polite, mild mannered.

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Fahad bin Mahmoud Al Said
Deputy Prime Minister for Legal Affairs since May 1979 . . . has an undergraduate degree from Cairo University and a graduate degree from the University of Paris . . . married to a French woman . . . Embassy officials have described him as one of the most impressive and indolent of ruling family . . . 43 years old.

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censorship of books deemed un-Islamic, and adherence to Ibadhi personal law in the legal system. He has not, however, claimed any special religious role for himself. There is no sign of a religious-based challenge to Qaboos similar to the revolts against his father inspired by the Imam of Oman in the 1950s and 1960s. According to the Embassy, the current Imam (religious leader) of Oman lives in exile in Saudi Arabia, and we have no reporting indicating that Omanis support his cause or show fervor for fundamentalism.

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Ibadhism, however, could again become a potent force in Omani politics, particularly in a succession crisis. Ibadhism's political traditions do not allow for a hereditary monarchy or absolutist rule. Ibadhism is an offshoot of early doctrinal tensions within Islam over leadership of the Islamic community. While Sunnis argued that the leader of Islam should be selected from the family of the Prophet Muhammad and Shias claimed that the succession could only be

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from among the descendents of the Prophet's son-in-law Ali, Ibadhis believed that the best man available should be nominated by tribal and religious notables and elected by the community. If a suitable candidate were not available, then the office should remain vacant.

More important, Ibadhism has historically served as the vehicle through which Omani nationalism is expressed. It has given Omanis a rallying point against external threats as well as against Al Said tyranny. Ibadhism remains the political ideal for the majority of Omani citizens, who see it as a democratic system with elaborate checks on absolute authority. Those checks include the traditions of limiting military power, consulting the "people," electing the imam (religious leader) or ruler, and constitutional restrictions based on shari'a, or religious law. Ibadhism could serve as a rallying point for opponents of the Al Said among both the conservative religious elites and the new middle classes because it is in keeping with both traditional Omani values and more liberal democratic trends.

Ghalib bin Ali bin Hilal al-Hinawi, the Imam of Oman

72-year-old spiritual and political leader of Oman's Ibadhi Muslim community . . . governed interior of Oman until 1955 when Sultan Said regained control of country . . . two years later began rebellion against Sultan as head of Omani Revolutionary Movement . . . has lived in exile, primarily in Saudi Arabia, since 1959 . . . declined offer from Qaboos in 1970 to return to Oman as either a private citizen or a religious figure . . . in contact with senior officials of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman in the 1970s . . . described as harsh, irascible, and cantankerous . . . has little support in Oman but could serve as popular symbol for opposition sentiments.

Tribal Politics and Succession

Tribes are an important source of power in Oman. Historically, tribal leaders exercised considerable autonomy. Until the British intervened on behalf of the Al Said rulers in the 19th century, the tribes restricted the family's authority to the capital. Western observers believe that the tribal groups, with few exceptions, support Qaboos because his mother is from an important tribal family in Salalah, the capital of Dhofar Province where Qaboos spends most of the year, and he has promoted tribal concerns and individuals in his government.

Although the tribes remain the basis of social organization in Oman, especially outside the capital, and their leaders still wield considerable political power, Qaboos's regime has weakened the influence of many tribal elites. Muscat has intervened in—and in at least one case prevented—the selection of tribal leaders. The government also circumscribes the traditional role of the tribal leader by dispensing financial aid and other benefits directly to the people rather than through the tribal leader.

Still, Muscat has not attempted to eliminate the traditional tribal elites as a separate power bloc. Qaboos continues to seek tribal support for his policies by appointing representatives of important tribal families to high-level government posts and encouraging investment in Dhofar, Musandam, and other remote tribal areas. tribalism is still a potent factor in Omani politics and claim that tribal leaders still resolve local conflicts and act as intermediaries with the government. If a political crisis were to develop in Muscat over the succession, or if local subsidies were drastically cut because of a decline in oil revenues, local tribal elites could assume a much more active role as powerbrokers in Muscat.

In our judgment, the tribes probably share the interests and prejudices of the Omani nationalists. Like the nationalists, they are personally loyal to Qaboos but less enthusiastic about the Al Said family. They may be sympathetic with the nationalists' attempts to

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restrict Zanzibari Omanis from ministerial and military posts, hoping thereby to expand their own role in the government. We believe tribal leaders probably would favor Thuwainy or Faisal (a cousin of Qaboos's who is Minister of National Heritage) as compromise candidates for the succession—both apparently have longstanding ties to the tribes—but would also hope to see some widening of the political process to allow them a greater role in the government. (b)(3)

The Subversive Threat

We believe it unlikely that Qaboos will be overthrown by an externally supported insurgency. The major antiregime faction with a foreign base is the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, a Marxist group that replaced the Omani Revolutionary Movement in the 1970s as the leading force in the rebellion against Sultan Qaboos's father. The PFLO receives limited financial aid, safehaven, and training support from South Yemen, Syria, Libya, and the USSR. Since its defeat in 1975, however, its ranks have been seriously weakened by defections, disagreements over tactics, forced inactivity, and cutbacks in aid from its sponsors. Its recent efforts aimed at recruitment and reorganization appear unsuccessful. Reliable sources estimate that the PFLO currently has fewer than 500 members, most of whom are in exile in Syria or South Yemen. We believe the organization enjoys little popular support inside Oman and has only a limited capacity to undertake guerrilla operations in Dhofar or urban terrorism. In our judgment, the PFLO will not return to the prominent role it played in spearheading resistance to Muscat in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (b)(3)

Reliable sources report that Iran has established an Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oman—similar to other dissident groups it has set up against Iraq and Bahrain—and may be training Omani Shias for operations against Muscat. several IFLO members had returned to Oman in 1982 and had established a safehouse in the United Arab Emirates. We believe, however, that Oman's Shia community has little interest in supporting Iranian propaganda or subversive activities. The Shia population is small—less than 5,000—and primarily of Indian rather than Persian stock. It is closely monitored by Omani security— —for signs of dissident activity.

Prospects for Political Stability After Qaboos

Reporting has been reassuring in noting the absence of opposition to Qaboos, the lack of dissatisfaction with his policies, and the absence of significant underlying discontent that might confound his potential successors. A number of nongovernmental experts generally share this optimistic view of Oman's stability. For example, two noted scholars (b)(1) (b)(3)

judged that Oman would be among the most stable of these states following the death of its ruler. The scholars based their view in part on Oman's lack of political and social institutions—no political parties and no labor unions—around which opposition could coalesce. (b)(3)

Nonetheless, we agree with those observers who are uneasy about Omani society and politics below the Palace level. We believe several issues could produce serious instability in the country, although none currently appear threatening. These include resistance to the British presence in Oman, strained tribal relations with the central government in Muscat, the emergence of a professionally trained middle class with new aspirations, the return to Oman for the first time of a significant number of students educated in the West, and prospects for a resurgence of religious fundamentalism. (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(3)

The nationalists, who are likely to dominate a successor regime, will seek to reduce corruption, eliminate the last vestiges of British influence, and spread the benefits of Oman's oil wealth to keep centrifugal forces in Omani society under control. They are conscious of the need to forge links with the tribes in the interior and to satisfy new social groups being created by the modernization process. Their efforts to institute reforms are certain to impinge on the preserves of the more traditional elites, however, and could eventually bring them into conflict with the new Sultan. (b)(1) (b)(3) (b)(3)

Omanis Versus British

Potentially the most damaging issue confronting the Sultan's successors is likely to center on the extent of the British presence in Oman. For the moment,

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Indicators of Instability

In addition to the general concerns about Oman's stability already noted, we believe the following developments, if they occur, would indicate that serious political problems were beginning to emerge:

- *Criticism of Qaboos or his successor for mismanagement of the government or the economy, favoritism, ineffectiveness as a leader, or cooperation with the United States.*
- *Reports of growing frustration over the lack of political process, the ineffectiveness of the State Consultative Council, or the lack of local representantive government bodies.*
- *Frequent complaints about unfair land distribution and misallocation of resources, or the emergence of charges that the new generation of Omani officials appointed by the nationalists were unfairly enriching themselves.*
- *Grumbling about pervasive police efforts to monitor Omani urban and village areas.*
- *Reports that the government's budget for police and security units and prisons was increasing substantially.*
- *Resignations of senior and middle-level political leaders.*
- *Resignations of Omanis from the military, in particular from the Air Force.*
- *Reports of clandestine printing presses being uncovered and antiregime leaflets appearing, particularly in Muscat.*
- *Substantial disaffection among Oman's student population.*
- *Increased urban unemployment or underemployment of skilled technicians and professionals leading to more complaints about the number of expatriates working in Oman.*
- *Complaints that too much of Oman's budget is being spent on defense and too little on services or regional development.*
- *Complaints about income disparities, in particular if they focus on Omanis receiving less than expatriates for comparable work.*
- *The appearance of white banners, particularly in the more remote provincial areas, which could signal a resurgence of support for the exiled Imam of Oman.* (b)(3)

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continuing British influence and the slow pace of Omanization do not appear to be sources of widespread unhappiness and have not generated genuine discontent. Recent differences between Omani nationalists and British military advisers over foreign policy, intelligence issues, and military purchases have been contained, but we believe they presage more serious confrontations as the nationalists seek to accelerate the advance of Omanis in the armed forces and end the royal insistence to "Buy British." If the British hang on too long and are perceived by Omanis as obstructing Omanization, British influence in Oman could become a destabilizing factor for the first time in two centuries.

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Young Omanis and Young Turks: Prospects for a Coup

The current generation of nationalists is conscious of the dissatisfaction of Omani youth. Omani officials are concerned that students educated abroad could become a disruptive force if frustrated by a lack of meaningful careers. that there are young Omanis in officer cadet school who do not remember the "bad old days" before Qaboos. These young men have only

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known an affluent Oman and already are outspoken in their criticism of what they perceive to be shortcomings in their government and their ruler. Their complaints could increase if they believe they are denied their just promotions in the military, the government, or private industry—areas dominated by expatriates and Omanis from the traditional merchant families, some of whom hold prestigious positions more because of their connections than merit. A downturn in the economy brought about by declining oil revenues could also lead to pressures for change from these groups.

The Omani nationalists are closely identified with Qaboos, but, if he begins to come under intense popular criticism, the nationalists could attempt to stage a preemptive coup and remove him rather than risk losing the gains they have made or their positions in the government. Similarly, the nationalists might move against a successor if he strongly opposed the nationalists' policy goals. Although we believe the possibility of a coup is small, several of the nationalists came of age politically in the heady environment of Cairo and Baghdad in the 1950s and 1960s when palace coups were not uncommon. The nationalists control enough key positions in the government and the military to have reasonable prospects for a successful coup if they were to act together.

Four years ago we judged that the military's influence in determining the succession would increase over time and make a military ruler more likely.[3] We judge now, however, that the military as an institution is unlikely to play a major role in political decision making over the next few years. Oman's military traditionally has been apolitical, to a great extent because of the large number of expatriates who control it. We see no indication that Omanis in the military aspire to active political roles. If young Omanis in the military—like their civilian counterparts—become frustrated by their inability to advance and assume responsibility for military decision making, however, they would be more likely to support the nationalist leaders in a coup attempt

Implications for the United States

The most likely succession in Oman—one that replaces Qaboos with another Sultan from the Al Said or that directly brings to power the current generation of Omani nationalists—probably will have little impact on Oman's relations with the United States. Nationalists, like Alawi, who are likely to dominate the new government already play the principal role in formulating Oman's policy toward the United States and favor strategic cooperation with Washington. They—or almost any successor government in Muscat—probably would oppose a significant upgrading in relations, but they are also unlikely, in our judgment, to abrogate current military and economic agreements. (b)(3)

Oman under the nationalists will remain critical of aspects of US policy toward their country. Senior Omani officials already claim that the 1980 Access Accord with the United States poses a real—and an unappreciated—danger for Oman. They complain that US military projects have grown too quickly, are too complex, and threaten to "overwhelm" the small country. They worry that US efforts to implement the access agreement—on issues ranging from P-3 air surveillance operations to control of pre-positioned military equipment—will in effect create "bases," whereas the Omanis agreed only to provide the United States with access to facilities. They will continue to press for additional financial aid and will argue that US financial compensation—approximately $300 million since 1981—for the facilities Oman offers and for the political risks Muscat is taking is niggardly compared with the billions of dollars provided annually to Israel and Egypt. (b)(3)

We believe that a successor regime dominated by the nationalists will also be more vocal in echoing the frustration with US policy in the Middle East that is commonly heard in moderate Arab capitals such as Amman, Cairo, and Riyadh. The nationalists already have expressed the view to US officials that the US withdrawal from Lebanon in 1982 was abandonment (b)(3)

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US-Omani Relations: Backdrop to the Accord

When Oman and the United States signed the Access Accord in 1980, Muscat's primary concern was security. The agreement gave the United States access to Omani military facilities under certain conditions and allowed pre-positioning of some US military equipment. The Shah of Iran, Qaboos's closest regional ally and protector, had just fallen. South Yemen was still supporting insurgent efforts to foment a rebellion in Dhofar. The Soviet Union appeared to be attempting to encircle the Arabian Peninsula with its invasion of Afghanistan and its military support for the Marxist regime in Ethiopia. Despite his close ties with the British, Qaboos and his advisers—led by then de facto Foreign Minister Qais al-Zawawi—concluded that London could not be relied on to protect Oman in the 1980s. (b)(3)

The Sultan's decision to turn to the United States came at the same time Washington was looking for regional allies to work against Soviet expansionism in Southwest Asia and to protect Western access to Persian Gulf oil. Negotiation of the accord was made easier by the parochialism of Oman's leaders. Zawawi, for example, took only a token interest in Oman's relations with its neighbors and the impact expanded military and security ties with the United States would have in the Gulf. (b)(3)

Conditions in Oman and the Gulf and Omani perceptions of the threats to their security have changed since the accord was negotiated in 1980. The leaders who negotiated the accord have been replaced by Omani nationalists. The latter, and Alawi in particular, still value their country's special relationship with the United Kingdom as well as its close ties to the United States. But they take a more hardheaded, "Oman-first" view of Oman's national interests than did the Muscat Mafia. The USSR, now bogged down in Afghanistan, no longer appears so menacing to Muscat. In South Yemen, a pragmatic Marxist, Ali Muhammad al-Hasani, seized power in April 1980 and appears to be moderating Aden's policies toward Oman. (b)(3)

Under Alawi's direction, Muscat has expanded ties with its neighbors in the Gulf and drawn closer to other like-minded Arab moderates. Oman has played a prominent role in the deliberations of the four-year-old Gulf Cooperation Council—it will act as host to this year's summit—and the Council in turn has influenced Omani foreign policy. GCC deliberations have brought Oman into sustained contact with the other monarchical regimes on the Arabian Peninsula and exposed Omani policymakers to inter-Arab and Arab-Israeli issues. (b)(3)

of an ally in distress, raising questions about US steadfastness in the Gulf. The nationalists will continue to view revolutionary Iran as a major threat to their security and, like other Gulf Arabs, to fear that the US presence in Oman may attract rather than deflect Iranian hostility. (b)(3)

If the nationalists come to power through a coup, we believe the effect on relations with the United States will be more dramatic. Nationalist leaders governing on their own, in our view, would depend more on traditional elites in Omani society—the tribes, religious factions, even perhaps the Imam of Oman—as well as on newer, more radical groupings, such as foreign-educated students, young professionals, Omanis in the military, or religious fundamentalists. We believe the nationalists would tailor relations with the United States to suit these groups to consolidate their hold over the government. The result would be a weakened central government and a more vulnerable relationship with the United States. (b)(3)

The greatest danger to US interests in Oman would come in the unlikely event that the nationalists could not govern effectively because of conflict among elites or with the emerging generation of potentially dissatisfied Omanis. Such conflict could provide opportunities for currently quiescent elements to coalesce against the government and its ties to the West. (b)(3)

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Appendix

The Nationalists' Agenda

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In the past three years the nationalists have assumed control of most leadership posts in the government and begun to play a decisive role in policymaking. We believe the progress they have made thus far in curtailing corruption, promoting like-minded Omanis to responsible posts, and initiating reforms has been significant and indicates the direction Omani politics will take after Qaboos.

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Corruption and the Muscat Mafia

The nationalists have had some success in containing the Muscat Mafia. Since 1982 several of the more notorious members of the old guard have been removed from the Cabinet, including Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Qais al-Zawawi and Minister of Commerce and Industry Muhammad al-Zubayr. Both men, who have longstanding reputations for avarice and conflict of interest, were subsequently appointed special advisers to the Sultan for economic development, a largely honorific post. In addition, Deputy President of the Palace Office Ahmad Suwaidan al-Baluch was demoted to Minister of Posts, Telegraphs, and Telephones in January 1984.

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Although the nationalists may have restricted the official activities of the Muscat Mafia, they have not been able to alter the Sultan's continuing reliance on them, in our view. Zubayr and the Zawawi brothers remain members of Qaboos's inner circle even though they have been removed from the Cabinet.

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The nationalists have made considerable progress in appointing like-minded Omanis to positions in the Cabinet, the influential Palace Office, and, to a lesser extent, the intelligence and security services. The changes include the rehabilitation of Salim al-Ghazali, who was once Undersecretary in the Defense Ministry, as Minister of Commerce and Industry and the appointment of Saif Muhammad al-Battashi to be Undersecretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Battashi had no experience in foreign affairs but was appointed because he was an "Omani Omani" who had worked in the Palace Office, according to Embassy sources.

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Omanization and the British

The nationalists have had less success in Omanizing the military. We believe they are deeply concerned about Oman's image, particularly in the Arab world, as a lackey of the United Kingdom. The reputation, they probably would admit, was once justifiable, stemming from the lack of Omanis with the skills to staff a modern military. They believe that Omanis must take control of policymaking with expatriates remaining only in advisory roles. They also realize that they must proceed slowly in order not to antagonize Qaboos, who is still an Anglophile.

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In pursuit of Omanization in the military and security services, Qaboos has replaced several British officers with Omanis in the last two years.

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- In November 1984, Sultan Qaboos issued a decree giving control of intelligence and security to the Palace Office—staffed predominantly by Omanis; this included military intelligence,

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- In December 1983, Qaboos appointed Abdullah Salih al-Habsi as Deputy Director General of Intelligence in the Internal Security Department (formerly called the Oman Research Department)—the country's principal intelligence organization; Habsi became the highest ranking Omani in the service.

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- Maj. Gen. Nasib Hamad al-Ruwayhi became the first Omani to head the Land Forces in November 1984,

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- The same month, Group Capt. Muhammad Mubarak al-Amri was appointed Chief of Operations for the Air Force, the most senior Omani in the service. Qaboos also intends to appoint an Omani as Commander of the Air Force in 1986, according to a senior Omani official. (S NF NC OC)

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Qaboos himself contributes to the tokenism apparent in some of the more recent appointments. According to reliable sources, the Sultan appointed Omanis to some staff posts, particularly in the military and intelligence, to ease criticism from Arab counterparts and to enable Oman to participate in regional military meetings and exercises where British officers are unwelcome. Reliable sources reported in September that the Sultan was not "prepared" to appoint Omanis to head either the Internal Security Department or the Royal Guard Brigade, both of which are responsible for his personal security.

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Policy Issues

The nationalists are making slow but steady inroads in other areas of policymaking. We believe they have extended the authority of the Palace Office and Cabinet to include some aspects of military and security decision making. Alawi and Ali Majid successfully argued that negotiations on the Access Accord with the United States and political/military discussions be channeled first through them Since 1982, Alawi has convinced a reluctant Sultan to reestablish relations with South Yemen, major backer of the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, and aligned Muscat closer to other Gulf Arab states in supporting moderate Arab and regional causes. Muscat has become more outspoken on Palestinian issues as well, although we believe that Alawi, like the Sultan, will not recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization. In our judgment, Alawi may also support the initiation of contacts with the USSR, although he probably would not push the Sultan on this issue.

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We believe the nationalists are able to advance their views, interests, and supporters because they are compatible with those of other influential Omanis having access to Qaboos Their efforts also have coincided with Muscat's new role in GCC and Arab affairs.

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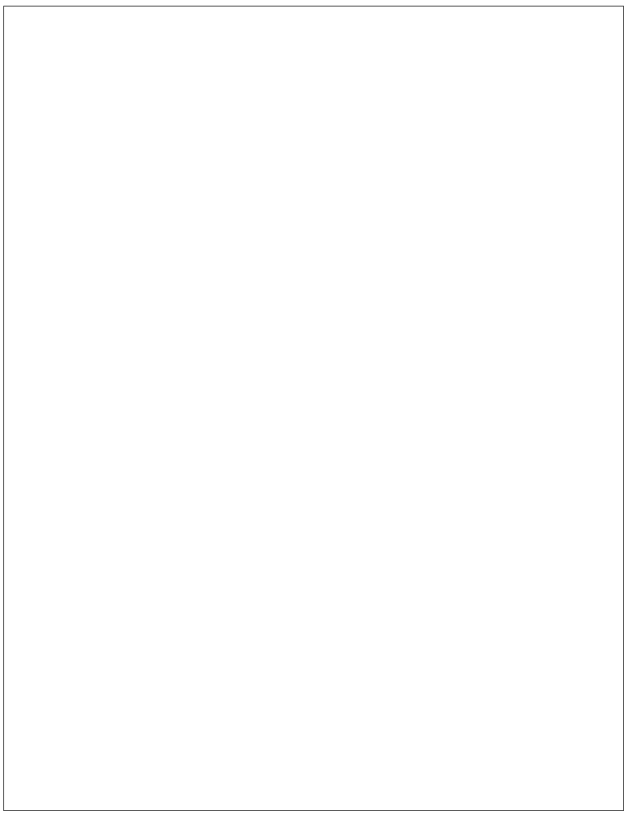

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